New York
Theatre Critics' Reviews
1956

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Bells Are Ringing"

Daily Mirror

November 30, 1956

Robert Coleman's **THEATRE:**

'Bells Are Ringing' Latest B'way Click

• Judy Holliday sheer delight for the eyes and ears.

"Bells Are Ringing" at the Shubert Theatre box-office this morning, for the Theatre Guild installed a bright new hit there Thursday evening. Those lucky enough to get through will be pleading for "just a couple for that Judy Holliday show."

The moral of it all is: Don't wait till the last minute to do your shopping. Christmas or theatrical. Otherwise there'll be delays in getting those holiday presents you want. And a pair of ducats for the Betty Comden-Adolph Green-Jule Styne song-and-dancer would be a prize for Santa Claus to leave in anyone's stocking.

THERE'S AN INVALUABLE institution in Manhattan called the answering service. It's for busy people who can't stay home and wait for their phones to ring. One of the most helpful of these is Susanswerphone, where a little Miss Fixit named Ella Peterson takes messages, gives advice and gets people jobs.

According to Comden and Green, some of these information drops are dubious and under police surveillance. Susanswerphone, for instance, was used by bookies to take wagers on the gee-gees. Without Sue's knowledge, of course. Their code was a musical one, with Wagner or Verdi, a symphony or concerto, representing tracks and entries. A bet on Bellini could win or lose you a handsome sum.

When kind-hearted Ella, with her inside info on what's what about town, pepped up a despondent playwright, got a job for an actor in it and turned a frustrated dentist into a Tin Pan Alley bigshot, Inspector Barnes moved in. But when he discovered that it was really the Happiness Exchange, he bowed out.

Judy Holliday, after too long a stint in Hollywood, is triumphantly back as the helpful "hello" girl. She sings, dances and romances in festive Holliday style. She tempers the satiric touch with irresistible warmth. She's sheer delight for the eyes and ears.

SYDNEY CHAPLIN, making his Broadway bow, is big-time, too, as the dramatist who lands a producer and a girl because he called the right number. Dort Clark as a conscientious cop; Eddie Lawrence, as a music-minded bookie; Jean Stapleton, as his innocent victim; Bernie West, as a tooth-yanker with a sharp-and-flat touch; and Frank Aletter, as a reformed Marlon Brando, are other stand-outs.

Jerome Robbins and Bob Fosse are deft with the dial, in staging "Bells Are Ringing." The beauty of their choreography is that it's based on what every nightclub aficionado thinks he can do. And, believe us, after a visit to the Shubert, a lot of nitery habituees are going to have fun trying to duplicate their steps under the chilling eyes of the gay-spot maitre d's.

Betty Comden and Adolph Green have created characters that stick in the mind, and Jule Styne has fashioned tunes that will make the juke-box emirs rich. "Bells Are Ringing" really bongs the golden gong. It strikes a happy, Holliday note.

"BELLS ARE RINGING"

Musical comedy with book and lyrics by Betty Comden and Adolph Green, music by Jule Styne; staged by Jerome Robbins; choreography by Bob Fosse; sets and costumes by Raoul Pene du Bois; orchestrations by Robert Russell Bennett; musical director Milton Rosenstock; lighting by Peggy Clark; presented by the Theatre Guild at the Sam S. Shubert Theatre, November 29, 1956. The cast:

Sue.....Jean Stapleton
Gwynne.....Pat Wilkes
Ella Peterson....Judy Holliday
Carl.....Peter Gennaro
Inspector Barnes ....Dort Clark
Francis.....Jack Weston
Sandor.....Eddie Lawrence
Jeff Moss.....Sydney Chaplin
Larry Hastings..George S. Irving
Telephone Man.....Eddie Heim
Ludwig Smiley.....Frank Milton
Charles Bessemer..Frank Green
Dr. Kitchell.....Bernie West
Blake Barton.....Frank Aletter
Joey.....Tom O'Steen
Olga.....Norma Doggett
Carol.....Ellen Ray
Paul Arnold.....Steve Roland
Michelle.....Michelle Reiner
Waiter.....Ed Thompson
Maitre d'Hotel..David McDaniel
Police Officer..Gordon Woodburn
Madame Grimaldi, Donna Sanders
Mrs. Mallet...Jeannine Masterson

New York Herald Tribune

November 30, 1956

THEATER

'Bells Are Ringing'

By WALTER KERR

I KNOW it's getting on for Christmas in New York City, but it's already spring at the Shubert.

You can tell by the slightly balmy breeze that seems to waft Judy Holliday this way and that, with a glazed look in her large dark eyes and a surprised smile on her face.

Miss Holliday, innocent that she is, probably shouldn't be out alone in this weather, but now that she's out there's probably nothing to do about it but mark the calendar "April" and play along with her moonstruck whim.

She's wonderful. Betty Comden and Adolph Green have imagined her as a piping voice on the other end of a telephone answering service, a voice that brings wisdom and passion and heartfelt interpretation to every passing message, and Miss Holliday has just the errant, unpredictable, unquenchably sunny soul for the purpose.

Watch her whip on a smudge of lipstick before she takes a certain call. It's an old gag, but Miss Holliday means it. Listen to her trickle out a sneaky little laugh as she plans a double-cross that will bring fame and fortune to a couple of her customers. It's Machiavelli with a heart of gold. And attend carefully as her knees go rhythmic, her fingers start waving, and her high nasal soprano quavers to a "Swanee" beat while she explains that if she'd been on the switchboard when Romeo and Juliet were dating "those two kids would be alive today." Friar Lawrence could take lessons.

As a matter of fact, Miss Holliday isn't out alone. She has an extraordinarily stalwart, lively, and infectious companion to chase her through New York penthouses and New Jersey subway stations, to catch hold of her in a splendid Jule Styne ballad called "Just in Time," and to kick up a little dust of his own in a Jerome Robbins-Bob Fosse fandango that splits the air with the brassy pronouncement "I've Met a Girl."

He is Sydney Chaplin, he looks a bit like Victor Mature and a bit like his father Charles, and for all that he was obviously fighting a bad throat last evening the best melodies—"Long Before I Knew You" among them—were in very good hands. More than that, Mr. Chaplin is an actor of some substance and great sincerity, and when he's admitting to himself that he's afraid to tackle a new writing project or when he's gritting his teeth with a simple I'll try, the quality that most distinguishes "Bells Are Ringing" is getting a healthy boost.

That quality is its homey, comfortable, old-shoe belief in its attractive people and its wide-eyed love story. Comden and Green have cut across this child's garden of Broadway verses with a tangle of police inspectors, bookies, mobsters and the kind of occasional comedy that leans on sputtered German dialect. Indeed Miss Holiday has to run pretty fast to get off on a couple of the more contrived blackouts.

But what matter? Miss Holliday gets a chance to explain how she always knew she had to get a new Ticonderoga pencil when her old one was sharpened down to its 'T,' Mr. Chaplin gets a chance to stare at this matter-of-fact mystic and mutter "I've tried analysis, why not witchcraft?" and that odd little miracle that makes you root for a musical-comedy couple simply happens.

Add to that a rousing Schnitzelbank based on the Racing Form, an interpolated Cha-Cha sleekly cha'd by Peter Gennaro, an owlishly funny dentist cartooned by Bernie West, a name-dropping catalogue rattled off by a restless chorus, increasingly handsome settings by Raoul Pene du Bois, and a show-stopping Styne parody of all those goin'-home songs, and you've got—in a cozy, old-fashioned, warm-hearted way — a sweetheart of a show.

DAILY NEWS

November 30, 1956

Judy Holliday, Sydney Chaplin Put Zing into 'Bells Are Ringing'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

In "Bells Are Ringing," the musical which the Theatre Guild presented at the Shubert late yesterday afternoon, Judy Holliday is a switchboard operator for a telephone answering service, which is an invention of Lucifer himself. Miss Holliday adapts her personality to every call that comes in. Since she has a great deal of personality to spread around, "Bells Are Ringing" is a bright and generally satisfying show. In the romantic department—boy loves girl and all that stuff—she is ably aided by Sydney Chaplin, Charlie's son, who seems to be a new-type Robert Alda.

Betty Comden and Adolph Green have contributed the book and lyrics. The plot is about this impersonal telephone-answering girl who falls in love with a party-loving playwright, and he falls in love with her, but he doesn't know who she is, and you can take it from here.

Musical Bookmaker

There is a sub-plot which is occasionally funny in which a bookmaker subscribes to the answering service and manages to get the bets taken and placed by Miss Holliday and her fellow switchboard slaves under the impression that they are taking orders for hi-fi phonograph albums, like Beethoven's Tenth.

"Bells Are Ringing" is best when people are singing and dancing. There is a charming number, "Hello, Hello There," in which Miss Holliday and Chaplin act friendly toward the glum occupants of a Bay Ridge subway train, with happy results.

There is an excellent song-and-dance turn, staged by Bob Fosse in the style of his memorable "Steam Heat" number, in which Miss Holliday, Peter Gennaro and a dancing chorus do a novelty called "Mu-Cha-Cha."

She's Going Back

The Comden-Green lyrics are sprightly and literate, and the Green-Comden plot makes some happy side-trips off the path of standard musical comedy romance—such as presenting us with a dentist who is a would-be songwriter. This character is played by Bernie West almost as amusingly as the original of this character—the late Dr. Nathaniel Lief, who was my dentist and who used to practice his lyrics on me instead of using novocaine.

Jule Styne's music is generally jolly, and it has enough of those damned ballads, like "Just in Time," to stuff the juke boxes. Fortunately, Styne, Comden, Green and Holliday all come together with a great big click in the final song of the show. In this number Miss Holliday is fed-up with the telephone-answering business and vows she is going back to her old job as switchboard girl at the Bonjour Tristesse Brassiere Company.

Journal-American

November 30, 1956

Judy Holliday Triumphs in Nifty Frolic

By JOHN McCLAIN

"BELLS ARE RINGING," the new musical starring Judy Holliday which opened at the Shubert Theatre last night, is a big brilliant success. It has a pleasant and plausible little story to hold it together, it has agreeable and sometimes notable music, ingenious and often vociferous dance numbers, and it is delivered by a group of gifted and attractive young people. It is, in my humble compendium, the best original book show in recent memory.

The whole thing seems to be a happy union of Miss Holliday's unique talents, which include a perfectly workable and articulate singing voice, with the intelligent scripting of Betty Comden and Adolph Green, the engaging music of Jule Styne, and the swift and sure direction of Jerome Robbins. Add to this a delightful break-in performance by Sydney Chaplin, son of Charlie, playing opposite the star.

The authors have taken as a plot the simple gimmick of an operator for a telephone answering service who is unable to keep out of the lives of her clients. She brings success to a dentist who is a frustrated composer, she introduces a Marlon Brando-type actor to the refinements of Brooks Brothers clothes, and she regenerates a writer who is drinking his way through the last two acts of a play. This is the sustaining structure of the evening, and it provides plenty of fun.

Simple Sets

The mounting for the show is strangely simple, and the cast is not overpowering. Except for a couple of full-stage sets by Raoul Pene du Bois, the action progresses through revolving insets and drops, and most of the production numbers require no more than a dozen performers. But both boys and girls are skilled professionals—the singing and dancing is exceptional.

In the lead role Miss Holliday is only sensational. The same wistful, zany qualities are there, but now she unwinds a new and brilliant talent in selling a song. It will be many a day before we are treated to anything equalling her socko delivery of "I'm Goin' Back."

Sydney Chaplin makes a memorable debut as the whisky-happy hero. He is a prepossessing lad, he can dance enough to keep warm, and he has a sure and pleasant voice. He should be able to stay in this slot as long as he's interested.

Sure Hit Songs

Other salutary assists are offered by Jean Stapleton, Eddie Lawrence, Dort Clark, Peter Gennaro, Frank Aletter, Bernie West, George S. Irving and Jack Weston.

There are a couple of tunes which will certainly reach a nauseous peak of popularity: "Long Before I Knew You" and "Just in Time." All the numbers are fetching and some of them, like the subway scene, the "Midas Touch" spot and something called "Mu-Cha-Cha" are standouts.

When one sees a show of such all-around excellence the whole thing seems ridiculously simple. It has style, it is never labored, it is always amusing. Miss Holliday had better begin worrying about her New York State taxes for she's going to be a long-time resident.

New York Post

November 30, 1956

By Richard Watts Jr.

A New Triumph for Judy Holliday

It hasn't been exactly a secret in recent years that Judy Holliday is a comedienne of rare deftness, warmth and charm. But you hardly know the extent of her powers if you haven't seen her as the eager, helpful and imaginative employe of a telephone-answering service in "Bells Are Ringing," the new musical comedy, with book and lyrics by Betty Comden and Adolph Green and music by Jule Styne, which opened last night at the Shubert Theater. To sum up the situation as succinctly as possible, the show is a good one and Miss Holliday is simply immense.

The outstanding virtue of both "Bells Are Ringing" and its star is a warm-hearted friendliness that is wonderfully endearing. Possibly I can suggest the quality by referring to one scene. Miss Holliday and Sydney Chaplin, who has his own triumph, enter a subway car. She is all good cheer, he is all glumness, and the passengers, of course, are looking dismal. She can't endure such a state of affairs, and starts greeting the travelers cheerily. Soon the car is a riot of gaiety. I don't advise you to try it in real life, but it works out enchantingly in the theater.

The Bookmaker

There is quite a bit of plot exposition at the outset, and it worried me a little. The answering service, with Miss Holliday as special philosopher and friend to the clients, is fine. So are the detective, who thinks he has uncovered a vice racket, and the young author, who can't get around to writing. But when a genial scoundrel, with a scheme to conceal his bookmaking by a code consisting of the names of composers, threatened for a time to complicate things, it disturbed me. Please don't let it bother you, though. From then on, matters move along splendidly.

As a matter of fact, "Bells Are Ringing" is that pleasant rarity, a musical show that gets consistently better as it proceeds. My experience is that even the best of these shows tend to sag a little in the second act, but here the last half is superior to the first. I think the explanation is simple. After the story has been established, the warm-heartedness has an opportunity to expand, and the remarkably touching sweetness that Miss Holliday combines with her humor exerts its irresistible spell with ever increasing infectiousness and appeal.

That the new show has this infectious air is not entirely due to its star. Miss Comden and Mr. Green also deserve applause for it. Their lyrics are, as always, bright, gay and witty, but they are likewise pleasantly friendly and engaging, and their book has a spirit of warm humanity that is enormously helpful. Possibly some of their satirical points may seem a trifle intramural to later audiences, but there is plenty of fun that isn't specialized, too. And Jule Styne's music fits agreeably into the mood of an entertainment that is always both humorous and likable.

Although Miss Holliday is the chief delight of the evening, it also provides a most happy local debut for young Mr. Chaplin. He has ease, attractiveness, a pleasant acting gift, a sense of character and an agreeable singing voice, and it is quite clear that he is a welcome addition to our theater. The others in the cast are helpful, with particular attention deserved by Dort Clark as the fairly dim-witted sleuth, and Bernie West as a dentist with ambitions to be a song writer. There seems no doubt that "Bells Are Ringing" is going to have an entirely justified success.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

November 30, 1956

Judy Can Ring My Bell Anytime

By TOM DONNELLY.

Somehow or other they have gotten hold of the solemn end of the stick in "Bells Are Ringing" (at the Shubert). Every now and then the show perks up and goes crazy, in the best musical comedy tradition, or, to narrow it down, in the best tradition of Betty Comden and Adolph Green, who have turned out some notably bright and bouncy librettos in the last few years.

But by and large "Bells Are Ringing" is constructed of the stuff that women's magazine romances are made of.

The basic idea is great: Judy Holliday is a girl who works for a telephone-answering service and gets intimately involved in the lives of her clients.

The Bottle Blues.

Unfortunately, Judy's favorite client is an alcoholic, fear-ridden playwright, and it is Judy's task to stop him from singing soliloquies as he stares fearfully at the blank white paper in his typewriter, and move him in the direction of earnest creative effort and ballads with titles like "Long Before I Knew You."

Nothing very joyful comes of this, since Sydney Chaplin, who interprets the playwright, graces the musical stage like a bump on a log.

Perhaps Miss Holliday is tired of playing goofy blondes. In "Bells Are Ringing" she is sweet and subdued, a little Miss Fixit who wants everybody to be happy, never speaks a sharp word, and spreads the glad doctrine in unlikely places.

In the subway, for example, where she inspires the notoriously ill-tempered riders of Manhattan to frolic with the cozy abandon of a small-town high school class embarked on a hayride.

Judy Is Great.

Miss Holliday is an abundantly talented young woman, and if she wants to get away from Billie Dawn that's all right with me.

She is successful in everything she does in "Bells Are Ringing," but her material is not of a kind a star can fashion into a dazzling overriding performance.

The basic Comden-Green method is to string a number of sideline diversions and satires together, each amusing for its own sake, and each advancing the main action. At least that's been their their method up to now.

"Bells Are Ringing" contains a couple of sub-plots (a mob of crooked bookies at work, a police inspector who unjustly suspects our heroine of using her switchboard for immoral purposes, etc.), but these are handled in a perfunctory manner, and most of the incidental burlesques (a gaudy night-club floor show, an assemblage of mumbling actors in leather jackets trying to step into Marlon Brando's shoes) are either old hat or lost in the shuffle.

Jerome Robbins, who supervised the show, hasn't done much to get the dynamos whirring. The over-all pace is slow, the dances are few and far between, and not terribly stimulating.

Despite All This . . .

Well, now, after all this fretting, what are those golden moments I found among the dross?

Item: Miss Holliday forestalling a police officer by singing, in an Al Jolson tremolo, a song labeled "Is It a Crime?" (Is it a crime to help a fallen birdie back into its nest?)

Item: Miss Holliday attesting, again with a Swanee intensity, to her resolve to return to her old job: "I'm Goin' Back to the Bonjour Tristesse Brassiere Co."

Item: The nefarious bookies, rehearsing their secret codes based on the great composers, chorusing "Hialeah" to the tune of an "Alleluia!" borrowed from Handel.

Item: Miss Holliday, whenever encouraged to cut loose.

Item: Bernie West as a dentist given to composing songs on an air hose and converting the moans of his patients into haunting arias: "You Don't See Anything but It Hurts!"

Item: Miss Holliday, a dream girl even when playing it straight.

The New York Times
November 30, 1956

Theatre: 'Bells Are Ringing' for Judy Holliday

Actress Flies High in New Musical Show

By BROOKS ATKINSON

JUDY HOLLIDAY is even more talented than you may have suspected. In "Bells Are Ringing," which was put on at the Sam S. Shubert last evening, she sings, dances, clowns and also carries on her shoulders one of the most antiquated plots of the season.

Nothing has happened to the shrill little moll whom the town loved when Miss Holliday played in "Born Yesterday." The squeaky voice, the embarrassed giggle, the brassy naïveté, the dimples, the teeter-totter walk fortunately remain unimpaired.

•

As the romantic girl in a telephone answering service, Miss Holliday now adds a trunk-full of song-and-dance routines. Possibly they derive in part from the days when she was one of "The Revuers," with Betty Comden and Adolph Green, authors of "Bells Are Ringing." Without losing any of that doll-like personality, she is now singing music by Jule Styne and dancing numbers composed by Jerome Robbins and Bob Fosse. She has gusto enough to triumph in every kind of music hall antic.

She needs the gusto. And Sydney Chaplin needs the warmth, taste, skill and grace that make him an admirable leading man. For this is the season when the writers seem to be breaking down all over town, leaving the burden of comic entertainment to the performers. Miss Comden and Mr. Green have chosen an original subject—a telephone-answering service that leads into the personal lives of several people. That is how the dream girl played by Miss Holliday meets her sweetheart, and brings a number of other bizarre people together.

But there have not been so many surprised hellos, inept song cues and dance signals since "Oklahoma!" drove hackneyed musical comedy out of business. This brand of labored plot complication and manipulation is where we all came in many years ago. It leaves "Bells Are Ringing" on the level of a routine vaudeville show.

•

As vaudeville, it has virtues. Although Mr. Styne's taste in melody is conventional, he can often come up with a good production number, and the lyrics by Miss Comden and Mr. Green are always jaunty. "It's a Simple Little System" turns out to be a rousing piece of knavery, with Eddie Lawrence belting out the music enthusiastically. Apart from her skill with such pleasant numbers as "Bells Are Ringing" and "Is It a Crime?" Miss Holliday brings the evening to a flaring conclusion when she tosses all kinds of vaudeville revelry into a number entitled "I'm Goin' Back." Mr. Chaplin also has a winning musical style in "On My Own," "You've Got to Do It" and all his numbers with Miss Holliday.

Trust Mr. Robbins and Mr. Fosse to provide the regulation good ballet members—notably a sort of fandango in a subway, a crisply-performed Spanish number and some less original parodies of night-club roistering. Since Raoul Pène du Bois has a rich sense of color, the costumes are attractively simple and fresh. His sets are not as distinctive as most of his work.

Miss Holliday is a fantastic entertainer with a personality that is both amusing and endearing. As leading man, Mr. Chaplin is not only versatile but also honest. It is easy to believe everything he does and says. Last evening's audience seemed to have enormous enthusiasm for the show and for Miss Holliday in particular. But this department confesses to a feeling of disenchantment. The old writing routines are back; they are no gayer than they used to be.

Overcomes Antiquated Plot at Shubert

"Cranks"

DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER
November 27, 1956

'Cranks,' an Intimate Revue by Four Actors, Is Gently Pleasant

By JOHN CHAPMAN

If you, as a theatregoer, are tired of being bashed on the head by smash hits, dazzled by terrific successes and jolted by wows, I suggest that you drop in at the Bijou Theatre for a performance of a beguiling little show called "Cranks." It might soothe your nerves and make you feel contented.

"Cranks," a revue performed by three men and a woman, gets its title because a choreographer named John Cranko wrote it and put it together in London. A few weeks ago I would have said it was typically British, for it is quiet, quite often witty, always well-mannered and occasionally funny. But now, after the little dustup over the Suez Canal, I don't rightly know any more what "typically British" means.

It's Ingratiating

Anyhow, "Cranks" is an ingratiating affair. Although its cast can sing and dance, it does not have one big song or one big dance number. It contents itself with advising the audience politely, "Never say Boo to a goose," or entertaining it with delightful pantomime. It satirizes a few song styles subtly and knowingly, and some of its music is downright fascinating.

The four members of the company, Annie Ross, Hugh Bryant, Anthony Newley and Gilbert Vernon, do all the work on the stage, which includes moving the scenery. Everything they do is quietly precise, quietly good-humored. Some of what they do is just a little precious, just a little too cute, for my hardened taste, but most of it is interesting and expert.

Music Best Part

The music, by John Addison, may be the best part of "Cranks." It never belts out a melody, never comes within a furlong of a juke box; but much of it has an interesting and oddly tantalizing quality—enough of this quality to make me want to hear it again and listen more closely.

"CRANKS"

Revue written and staged by John Cranko; music composed by John Addison; scenery by John Piper; supervision and lighting by Paul Morrison; presented by Richard Charlton and John Krimsky at the Bijou Theatre, November 26, 1956, featuring the following cast: Hugh Bryant, Annie Ross, Anthony Newley, and Gilbert Vernon.

The orchestra, which is led by Anthony Bowles with no more than an occasional nod of the head as he sits at the piano, is as fascinating in its makeup as it is in the way it plays. It consists of a piano, a harpsichord, a clarinet and a bull fiddle, and it is as well-mannered as an Eighteenth Century combo.

I don't imagine "Cranks" will set the rialto ablaze, but it does offer a change of pace in the Broadway quickstep. I can recommend it to the few who want a pleasant evening away from home.

New York Post

November 27, 1956

By Richard Watts Jr.

That Intimate Revue From England

The intimate English revue called "Cranks," which drove London critics and certain visiting Americans, including this one, into mixed-up outbursts of enthusiasm, bewilderment and inadequate efforts to describe its quality, opened last night at the Bijou Theater with its cast and numbers intact. In the overseas attempts to explain what the four-performer musical show written and staged by John Cranko was like, rather frantic resemblances to the works of Dali, Picasso, Charles Addams and the surrealists were cited, and there's no reason for changing that now.

It is possible, though, that the term "off-beat" would have done just as well. For "Cranks," while it has a couple of conventionally sentimental songs, is a revue that avoids such staple commodities of the American intimate revue as spoken sketches, parodies of plays and movies, and satirical comments on current events. Mr. Cranko is a choreographer by profession and he depends in large part on dance and comic pantomime for his show's material. The basic pattern of his work is a frequent ballet of hands, and he has staged these particular numbers with humor and imagination.

Three Numbers

There is no denying, I think, the originality and oddity of "Cranks," or the courageous manner in which it keeps away from the conventions of the intimate revue. And there are several numbers that are delightful enough to please even those who may look with alarm at the show's intentional eccentricities. One is a pleasantly macabre song about a dead man, "Where Has Tom Gone?" Another is a fine comic pantomime about some people in a station waiting room. A third is a brilliant number in which a singer is distracted by a parcel brought in for another member of the cast.

At this point, however, I am forced into a most reluctant confession. That old devil, sea-change, seems to have raised its hideous head somewhere. "Cranks," as I saw it at the Bijou last night, is certainly the same show that enchanted me in London last summer. Its four people are the same, too, and I admired them just as much as I did when I first encountered them in the West End. Yet somehow the revue appears to have lost a vast amount of its freshness and sparkle. The definite reason eludes me, but a lot of the fun has disappeared in transit.

Four Performers

It clearly isn't because of the performers. Annie Ross is as engaging and talented a young comedienne as you could hope to find, and she sings and dances with humor, charm and skill. Anthony Newly is a first-rate comedian, the possessor of an admirable pantomimic gift and a most likable personality. Gilbert Vernon, who looks a bit like Harold Lang, is an excellent dancer and has a good sense of comedy. Hugh Bryant, the American in the cast, has a fine singing voice. All of them contribute gallantly to the commendable originality of "Cranks."

Possibly Mr. Cranko's revue is a show that you shouldn't know too much about in advance and which bears only one visit, although I wouldn't have believed it in London. But there is no evading the fact that it seemed only intermittently satisfying in its local premiere. At its best, it still seems to me delightful, and several of John Addison's songs continue to be attractive. And its very originality and imagination deserve appreciation and respect. I wish I could explain, if merely for my own satisfaction, why I didn't enjoy it more on my second visit.

New York Herald Tribune

November 27, 1956

THEATER

'Cranks'

By WALTER KERR

TO pick a number I liked, there's a bit in "Cranks" in which a young fellow named Anthony Newley strolls out in a tasseled fez, moistens his underslung lower lip, begins to sing something about "What did the gander mean to the goosie, what did the moonlight mean to Debussy?" and then notices a package that has just been delivered to the theater for some one else. Mr. Newley looks rather like the son of Dracula in any costume, and he now stares with a great bloodthirsty, unsatisfied hunger at the mysterious package. Try as he will to go on with the song, he cannot. His distraction is permament.

As I say, I liked the number and I liked Mr. Newley. But right then and there it struck me that this was precisely what the four British visitors who comprise the cast of the small-scale revue at the Bijou had been practising on their paying customers all evening—ingenious, calculated distraction from the actual merits of the material at hand.

The devices are endless, and a few of them are handsomely inventive. Among the latter I'd list a bluesy sea-chant sung by Hugh Bryant—a baritone with a fancy range—while his colleagues clutch a great piece of gauze and billow it in and out against a glowing ship's lantern. I'd count an unprincipled lament that asks, "Where Has Tom Gone?"—while a ghostly trio perched high on table-tops greedily announce that they want Tom's watch and chain—among the successful mood pieces, too.

But let's take careful inventory for a moment. When athletic Annie Ross wants to warble a routine little jazz job ("Love me, love my Roget's Thesaurus") she puts on a pair of rhinestone sunglasses to conceal her eyes. When three umbrella-carrying uncles chant a few jumpy lines about a niece named Josephine who is driving them 'bats,' the fantasia fights to a blackout by having the aforesaid uncles turn their umbrellas into bat-like, hovering wings. Another song gets under way by having one nimble mountebank, swathed in a red cape, toddle in on his knees at the same time that a two-man monster, towering high in air, rolls in reading a double newspaper. Late in the evening the parade of studiously irrelevant props is still going on: for a quartet labeled "Metamorphosis" one member of the group wears a pair of fried eggs across his forehead, another sits knitting as a lighted candle wavers on his head, still another carries an egg-beater to supplement the bird-cage that rests on his shoulders.

Now this may be design, and it may be duplicity. As a professional ingrate, I began listening to the lyrics that were being bypassed with a deadpan savoir-faire. And I discovered, as Gilbert Vernon spun high in the air or the energetic Miss Ross waved white gloves into space, that they were saying things like "It's terribly disconcerting to find that you're hurting someone you loved so," meaning that "there's nothing left but debris," and comparing "the blue smoke of cigarettes with the black smoke of regrets."

I listened to John Addison's music, too, and more and more it sounded like plucked-out, tapped-out incidental music for a rainy-night scene in a moderately well-scored movie. Finally, with a regretful backward glance at the lemon-ice nonchalance of the poised young players and the thousands of intricate finger-exercises director John Cranko had devised as visual suplement to the trickling rhythms (sometimes all forty fingers in the company are working at once), I forced myself to answer a simple question: would more than two or three of the thirty ditties stand by themselves without all this cool and calculated sleight-of-hand? How would that song be without sun-glasses? Is window-dressing enough?

I guess not.

Daily Mirror

November 27, 1956

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

British Revue Is Too Much, Too Arduous

• Cranks' just not what doctor ordered for average playgoer.

"Cranks," which docked at the Bijou Theatre on Monday evening after a voyage over from London, is real crackers. Translated into Americanese, old boy, that means crazy, man, crazy. If you're hovering on the brink of a nervous breakdown, this little import will push you right over the edge.

Fashioned by choreographer John Cranko, with a score by John Addison, the revue features a red-headed babe with a beautiful built—as the guys and dolls along Runyon Row would have it—yclept Annie Ross. And three lads named Hugh Bryant, Anthony Newley and Gilbert Vernon, in alphabetical order.

"CRANKS" GOT its monicker from Cranko. Get it? It has a few clever and tuneful moments, but it becomes on occasion so downright cute and coy as to approach the Bromo Seltzer border line.

The intimate entertainment is presented against decor by John Piper. The decor is a series of flats that might have been painted by a minor league Dali while waiting for a bus. Miss Ross wears a bareback rider's pink tutu in the first half and a black one in the second. They are cunningly calculated to display her contours. And she's got 'em.

The boys wear work pants and gaudy shirts. We just happened to notice that when the shape called Ross snagged a second or two off-stage. They prance and dance, sing and mime on, over and under chairs, tables and ladders. They make like baboons, bats, billows and—oh, Gad!

These youngsters are talented. They have good voices, off-beat senses of humor and a vitality that defies description. Unless one were defining perpetual motion in a nightmare. They would be sensational in an avant garde cafe for about half an hour.

AND THERE'S the rub. You get them for more than two hours at the Bijou, sans a sandwich and the cup that cheers. The brew that makes sophomoric sallies seem like platinum-plated patter. The British are known for their patience in the playhouse. Us Yanks are not.

"Cranks" ran for some nine months in London. We suspect it will be running toward a Britain-bound boat before you can say Piccadilly. It's just not what the doctor ordered for Mr. and Mrs. Average Playgoer, who got their fill of varsity shows on the campus.

In fairness to impresarios Richard Charlton and John Krimsky, we must report the first-nighters—or a majority of them — strained their throats cheering, blistered their palms applauding and put stitches in their sides laughing. They gave the gifted visitors a rousing reception.

So there's just no accounting for tastes. We shan't have to spend a cent this morning for gargles, burn ointment or adhesive tape. But we're going to take an extra vitamin pill as an antidote for ennui.

Journal-American

November 27, 1956

Revue Is Exciting--It's Crazy and Swell

By JOHN McCLAIN

EMERGING from the Bijou Theatre last night, I would not have been surprised if some men in white coats had ushered me into a wagon and taken me off to the laughing academy. Such is the mood in which one is left after viewing "Cranks," a small British revue.

And I wouldn't have objected, either, provided the performers could share my padded cell. For this is handily the most mad and exciting evening unwound hereabouts in many a monsoon. I haven't the shadiest idea of what it's about, but I think it's swell.

Other people in England, where it played for some time, have described it as the union of Salvador Dali and the man who wrote "Waiting for Godot," as Cocteau and Noel Coward gone goofy, and a number of other things. And they are quite correct; but to all of this should be added the fact that it is never dreary.

Perhaps the best way to approach the problem is to explain that "Cranks" consists of four actors; an orchestra of bass fiddle, piano, harpsichord, clarinet and harp; a single set consisting of some ingenious flats; three coat racks, two tables, a stepladder and four chairs. There are some other gadgets, like a silk sail, but they come and go untouched by union hands.

Now about these four performers: there is a very gifted young man from Brooklyn somewhat resembling Harry Belafonte; there is a girl out of Scotland (but mostly by way of California) somewhat resembling Gwen Verdon; there is another lad, a straight Englishman, somewhat resembling Peter Lind Hayes; and there is still another, a South African, somewhat resembling Harold Lang. That's the cast, and they are neither idle nor lacklustre.

What do they do? Well, Hugh Bryant, the Brooklyn boy, can sing a whale of a ballad, he can dance well enough, he has a feeling for comedy and timing; Annie Ross, the gal, is red-headed and saucy with a fetching figure—she has a good voice, she can dance and act; Anthony Newley, the Englishman, can do sketches and bright singles, is a truly accomplished comedian and has a fine, small voice; Gilbert Vernon, who fills out the foursome, is an exceptional dancer, but he can also sing and act better than acceptably.

What happens? Well, let's just take a typical number: it's called "Telephone Tango" and I can only tell you that Bryant is dressed as a matador and he is playing a telephone like a guitar, Vernon is making like a bull fighter, using a red table cloth to lure Miss Ross who is, I guess, a bull.

Meanwhile, on the same stage, Newley is singing something about, "If you're in difficulty, dial 'O'."

That's as far as I can go to describe the mood and genre of the proceedings. Any questions?

The show was written and directed by John Cranko, hence the name, and he has succeeded in making craziness commercial—a rare gift.

John Addison's music is always pleasant, often memorable. The set painted by John Piper defies description, which is exactly what was ordered.

Enormous plaudits must go to the orchestral combination, directed by Anthony Bowles.

"Cranks" will not be everybody's ticket to dementia, but it certainly sent me.